

Analytics of Power
An Interview with Judith Butler

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After the publication of her last book, *Parting Ways. Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, Judith Butler chose to discuss her most recent work in an interview, proposing a new analytics of power¹. She discusses how the most recent evolution of capitalism exposes populations to greater precarity, and defends the idea of a life that would be completely democratic, taking into account the multiplicity of power relations.

Since her work on gender in the early 1990s, Judith Butler has considerably diversified her field of research. The analysis of the modes of subjectification is still at the core of her work, but she has now gone beyond feminist theory to address ethical and religious questions. As she discusses the state, neo-liberalism, and the place of religion in public life, Judith Butler is reflecting on the political conditions of a livable life. The texts of traditional philosophy are still present in her work, but her analysis is now anchored in current politics, which sometimes requires from her to take a stand, as in the case of gay marriage and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Books and Ideas: In your work – especially in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* – you give a thorough analysis of the concept of precarity. Precarity is an undeniable reality, but it seems to be less of a sociological concept than an ontological one. As a consequence, couldn't we say that neoliberalism – as well as the major economic crisis resulting from the neoliberal deregulation of markets – is at the origin of a new form of precarity? Or is it the current economic situation that transforms the constitutive vulnerability of human beings into unbearable precarity? In *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* you insist on the necessity to include economic factors and not to neglect them in favor of a restrictive political analysis. Could you tell us more about the social impact of the current economic situation?

Judith Butler: I agree with the formulation that you offer, namely, that the economic factor tips the constitutive vulnerability of the human being into unbearable precarity. My only question is whether what you call the “ontological” is separable from what you call “the sociological”. Indeed, we have here two problems, since if we claim that neo-liberalism disposes populations to become disposable, and exposes populations to precarity, we have to ask whether we are speaking about a purely economic rationale and regime of power (by “neo-liberalism”), a regime of power that governs the practices of subject-formation, including self-making, and the valorization of the metric of instrumentality in ways that include and exceed the sphere conventionally denoted as “economic”. Indeed, does the power and pervasiveness of “neo-liberalism” compel us to think about the heteronomy of the economic and the way that the rationalities that govern its operation exceed the purely

¹ Judith Butler uses this expression in *Who Sings the Nation-State?*

economic. Must we give up an idea of the purely economic by virtue of neo-liberalism at the same time that we cannot do without the economic?

The question about ontology is more difficult to answer, but here again I want to insist that the entire point of thinking about precarity is to grasp more fundamentally what it is to be a social being. Since sociology always starts with this presumption, it is important that we think critically about it: what do we mean when we refer to a sociological concept of the subject, and how is that traditionally distinguished from an ontological one? When I maintain that the subject is socially constituted, or that the subject is constituted in and through its social relations with others, am I making a sociological or an ontological claim? For me the ontological does not take place at a level other than the social in such discussions. Since I am trying to say that human creatures – not only human ones – rely fundamentally on social institutions for their survival and persistence. That means that whatever they “are” is constituted at the juncture of such relations, and this means as well that when social institutions fail, they are threatened with “non-being” or modes of social death. You could call this a social ontology, but the modes of dependency and vulnerability to social institutions will vary, and not one description “at the level of ontology alone” would be possible.

Books and Ideas: In *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, you investigate the concrete social and political conditions of a "livable life". You first mention basic needs, as well as the need for protection and the necessity to belong to a social network of human relations. You also mention the need to be included in a working network. We would like to know more about the place and function of work in your thinking. Is work a prerequisite of a "livable life" and a structure of recognition for the subject? Or is work a more contingent, factual need for the individual, and not a symbolic structure of its existence?

Judith Butler: It is clear that work is necessary for the reproduction of the person – I take this from Marx’s theory of production in *The German Ideology*, and it remains central to my thought. Work is also necessary to produce the conditions of material existence and persistence. So, for instance, I am in favor of a “right to work” and I believe that it is the public obligation of state governments to provide the conditions for populations to work if they can. I object to those forms of protestant capitalism that claim that only those who work deserve to have food and shelter, since I hold that those basic rights should be honored by governments regardless of whether individuals happen to be employed. So I would refuse to say that only work provides for the material conditions of reproducing human life. That would end up being a moral position that would dispute all public obligations to provide shelter, food, healthcare, and education, to name a few.

When we speak about induced forms of precarity, we are talking about organizations of labour that depend on episodic employment, the replaceability of one set of laborers with another, and the disposability of the working population. Such forms of precarity are tactically produced to have a “flexible” labour force that produces widespread insecurity and despair among workers. It is also a way of damaging any sense of future, and of producing a permanent debt structure for those who have no way of predicting their working future.

Books and Ideas: Your research has focused on uncovering what works as a norm – primarily gender – without people being conscious of it. In what can be compared to a Foucauldian approach, you have sought to identify the phenomena of "literalization" or naturalization of norms. Today, as part of your analysis of power, you elaborate a normative approach, and thus adopt the angle of social criticism. But social criticism implies a position of exteriority, from which the state of reality is evaluated and which you have often denounced as problematic. What led you to focus on the normative dimension of your analysis?

Judith Butler: Foucault has always been part of my thinking, and that remains true. But I do not follow Foucault as one would follow Church thinking. I adapt his extraordinary work to new purposes, and perhaps he was one of the thinkers who showed me that this can be done with other thinkers. In any case, the analysis of gender performativity was always concerned to show how some performances were considered “ real ” and others “ unreal ”. I objected to this production of gender along those lines, and suggested that the most “ normative ” and “ convincing ” gender presentations were based on the same kind of mimetic mechanism as those that were conventionally considered deviant and unbelievable. So the idea of the “ normative ” occurs twice; in the first instance, normativity, as in heteronormativity, describes a normalizing and literalizing process, as you suggest above. But in the second place, there is a normative framework that seeks to contest and displace that very distinction between the real and the unreal. One can see this again when I speak about lives that are grievable and those that are not. This links the works on LGBTQ politics with the more recent work on war. My view is that it is wrong to consider some lives as more real, as more living, and others as less real or less living. This is a way of describing and evaluating the differential distribution of “ reality ” depending on how those populations conform to established norms. And they are also efforts to produce new normative schemes that would imply a rigorous critique of misogyny, homophobia, and racism in an effort to articulate a social and political world characterized by interdependency, equality, and even radical democracy.

Books and Ideas: In the United States Barack Obama has recently voted in favor of gay marriage. In France, the new president Francois Hollande said he was in favor of opening the right to marriage and adoption to homosexual couples. Political recognition of same-sex couples has been a subject of discussion for long, some seeing there a normalization of homosexuality. These proposals also appear at a time when homonationalism, the instrumentalization of sexual issues in race relations and the rhetoric of the clash of civilizations, is a crucial issue of sexual politics. How do you analyze these positions of left-wing governments in the U.S. and in Europe ? What are the political issues there?

Judith Butler : In the US, the pro-marriage position is one that has sought to establish a new normativity within gay life, rewarding with public recognition those gay and lesbians who enter into coupledness, property, and bourgeois freedoms. One has to be for gay marriage, and I am for gay marriage. But what concerns me is the way that gay marriage has become more important than some other political goals, including: rights of transgender people to be protected against violence, including police violence ; continuing HIV education, outreach and treatment ; social institutions for aging LGBTQ people who are not in couple forms ; radical sexual politics that does not conform to prevalent marital norms. Of course, it is good that gay and lesbian people have this right, should they choose to exercise it. And quite separately, I am firmly in favor of anyone having access to adoption and reproductive

technology regardless of marital status or sexual orientation. These are basic ways of opposing discrimination, and I support them.

It is true that some governments tactically call for such rights at the same time that they refuse immigrant rights, or at the same time that they wage cultural and material wars against muslim populations. And this has sparked an enormously important set of debates on pinkwashing and homonationalism. The point is to make sure that the struggle for one set of minority rights is not used to disenfranchise another minority. That means that as much as we must struggle for LGBTQ rights, we also have to do that in the context of a struggle for social and economic justice, and these means considering the ways in which our political claims can be used against our broader commitments to alliance and justice.

Books and Ideas: In *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging*, you raise the question of the relationship between life and politics and explain the necessity to imagine other forms of belonging than to the nation or to the state. When you discuss the work of G. Agamben, you underline the fact that he does not allow us to understand the stateless or militant subjectivities. This new analytics of power ultimately requires rethinking the concept of sovereignty, to propose a "new map of sovereignty". Could you come back on the concept of sovereignty?

Judith Butler: I am not really a theorist of sovereignty, so I am not sure I can answer your question well. Politics is a complex field, and I rely on many other thinkers to think well about concepts that are not directly within my field of vision. It is a limit, to be sure, but I wager that we each have such limits. I believe that in the above context, I was trying to say that those who are stateless, living in camps at the border, or living under occupation, engage in forms of political agency and resistance that cannot quite be described as "bare life." My view is that such lives are saturated in power even though they are excluded from the polis. And that the field of power in which they live is surely subjugating, but that subjugation is not an essential or exhaustive attribute. We see networks of care, practices of political mobilization, and forms of resistance in all of these places, and so we need to think about a model of power that affirms the range of what is there and what is happening. The state does not always act with "sovereign" power in relation to the people, since sovereignty has been to a certain degree diffused through governmentality. I have also suggested that Hannah Arendt's ideas of federalism (such as those she proposed for Palestine) depended fundamentally on a distribution of sovereign effects. I worry about positions that dramatize the central power of sovereignty over and against the field of bare lives. It is perhaps romantic and intriguing, but it does not help us see the contemporary formation of sovereignty or the modes of political saturation and agency outside of those sequestered within the polis or excluded from its borders. I take it, though, that Agamben's understanding of lives as "abandoned" is very useful for the thinking of precarious populations, even though that would not be his vocabulary.

Books and Ideas: Your work now focuses on the decisive nature of affects in the political field, by studying the images of Abu Ghraib for example. Several recent studies have shown the political dimension of affects such as shame, aversion or disgust, and have therefore renewed our way of thinking about power relations. It seems that positive affects – those that are not "sad" as Spinoza would say – are more rarely analyzed or defined. Do these joyful affects have a political dimension? What is their place in your new analytics of power?

Judith Butler: I have certainly talked some recently about the kind of “dispossession” even “ecstasy” that happens in street demonstrations, and am very interested as well in forms of vulnerability that lead to livable passion, not simply to exploitation. In making my argument against bourgeois forms of marriage, I am still holding out for a deregulated field of sexuality.

Books and Ideas: In your interview with P. Osborne and L. Segal, “Gender as Performance”, you mentioned your Jewish identity and your inability to write on the subject of Jewishness in connection with “the pain and shame that arouses in me the State of Israel.” The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is presented in your current writings as an exemplary situation which helps us understand the relationship between power and sovereignty. Your next book, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, is devoted to the question of Jewishness. What brought you back to this question? Is it the political agenda?

Judith Butler: I come from a very strong Jewish background, and so for me this book was an effort to return to my own formation, consider what I was taught, and do the necessary work to critically evaluate my Zionist upbringing. My critique of Zionism has been in process for a few decades, and it happened mainly in my more private conversations. But the public debates after 9/11 seemed to compel me to enter into a more public discourse on this issue. For me, some of the Jewish values that I was taught – the meaning of mourning in public and with others; the transience of life and, hence, its value; the struggle with non-violence – all have made their way into more general arguments, even arguments against contemporary political zionism. So I do not believe that one must renounce one’s Jewishness if one opposes the State of Israel, and I do not believe that if one criticizes that state, one is somehow anti-Jewish or anti-semitic (though sometimes that can be true). My aim is to make use of my formation in developing a set of positions that affirm an ethical and political life of Jews with non-Jews. It is a diasporic position, to be sure, but one that, following Edward Said, I think would be useful as point of departure for thinking about a radical democratic polity in Palestine.

Books and Ideas: In your work on gender, psychoanalysis was criticized both for its normative conception of gender identities and for its representation of women. But psychoanalysis was also essential in order to think about the psychic dimension of the processes of subjectivation and the vulnerability of the subject. In the interview with P. Osborne and L. Segal, “Gender as Performance” for example, you discussed this first use of psychoanalysis. Today, in your reflections on power, precariousness, there is always an important reference to psychoanalysis in particular through the mourning/grief process. Today what is essential for you in psychoanalytic theory to think about politics?

Judith Butler: I think we have to find ways of understanding how and why states and public institutions “disavow” the interdependency of human beings, and why dependency itself is considered by many liberal actors as an “unmanageable” idea. Usually dependency is used in the service of colonial and paternalistic political rationalities, but inter-dependency suggests equality. For me, the autonomous subject with no needs, the one who was never fed or raised by another person, is a highly problematic idea of the subject. Its defensiveness breaks social bonds and can only be preserved through denial and destruction. One needs psychoanalysis for this, but perhaps Hegel as well. Similarly, when destroyed populations are not grieved, called rather “collateral damage” or some such term, there is a denial of both violence and loss that needs to be exposed and countered.

Books and Ideas: Throughout your work, you always seek to identify the interdependencies which are part of life, and which make it precarious. This intersubjective and social frame of subjectivity is not unrelated to your relationship to Hegel, who more than any other (you point it out in *Sois mon corps*) keeps reminding that the subject is constitutively associated with the whole and the community, giving it meaning. Can we think of subjectivity outside of that social frame? Would an ethical solitary relationship to oneself be possible for example?

Judith Butler: Surely, there are relations that the self has to itself, but even when that self, very much alone, tries to reflect upon itself, or even to care for itself, it makes use of a set of conventions, terms, and norms that the self has not authored. These are social conventions that come to us from language and from a broader field of social signification in which we are all formed. When we start to reflect upon ourselves, we do not shed that social formation. It is there in the interstices of our thoughts and even in our idea of what a “self” should be. So though one can be quite isolated in one’s thinking or even physically alone, even when we cannot hear traffic and no other person is in sight, the animating trace of the social world still mediates our most intimate relations to ourselves.

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Further Reading:

- With Elizabeth Weed, *The Question of gender: Joan W. Scott's critical feminism*, Indiana University Press, 2011.
- *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, Columbia University Press, 2011.
- *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable ?*, Verso, 2009.
- With Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood and Wendy Brown, *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, University of California Press, 2009.
- With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging*, Seagull Books, 2007.
- *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Fordham University Press, 2005.
- *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, 2004.
- *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, 2004.
- *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*, Columbia University Press, 2000.
- With Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso, 2000.
- *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, 1997.
- *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997.
- *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge, London, New York, 1993.
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